

**Opening Statement**  
**The Honorable Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan**  
**House Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Thursday, March 5, 2015**

**Oversight hearing: “Department of the Interior Spending and the President’s Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Proposal”**

Welcome, Secretary Jewell. We all appreciate the opportunity to talk with you today about the President’s Fiscal Year 2016 budget proposal for the Department of Interior. Your Department touches the lives of so many Americans — including my constituents in the Northern Mariana Islands — in so many different ways; and I want you to know that overall I certainly support what the President is proposing.

But let me be parochial and focus on Department activities of specific importance to the Northern Marianas and more generally to the insular areas of the United States.

First, I want to thank you and the President for including in your budget the funds for a special resource study on the island of Rota. It took six years of work to get this study authorized, but finally last December we included the necessary language in the National Defense Authorization Act. And you have immediately followed up with a funding request. The study will consider the addition of areas on Rota, already determined to be of national significance, to the parks system. This could have an enormously positive effect on the island’s economy and probably boost tourism throughout the Mariana Islands.

Economic development is at the forefront of insular area priorities, as I am sure you are aware. Median income in the Northern Marianas is only \$20,000 compared to \$53,000 nationwide. We have a lot of catching up to do.

Interior's Office of Insular Affairs has done a very credible job in recent years, focusing limited resources on areas that really serve to develop the economy. I am thinking in particular of your Empowering Insular Communities program, which is helping us move from imported fuels — that are costly and take money out of our economies — to greater use of locally available energy sources.

I am thinking about the Insular Areas: Assessment of Buildings and Classrooms Initiative, which found that only 38 percent of insular schools are in acceptable condition and is systematically upgrading that infrastructure, so our children have schools that are conducive to learning and safe. Developing those human resources is the surest way to raise our economy.

Really, you would not go very wrong by simply concentrating all the resources you have on these two programs alone. Although, I know there are many other demands and very worthwhile ideas that receive funding.

But where resources are limited priorities are important. That is why I am concerned about the proposal in the budget to create a new Resilient Insular Areas program. I certainly recognize the reality of climate change. I understand that insular areas are particularly vulnerable to sea level rise, the destruction of coral reefs from ocean acidification, and increased storm intensity and change in rainfall patterns.

I would suggest, however, that we can address climate change without creating a new program and all the administrative framework that goes with. If we are concerned about the root cause of global warming, let's put more money in the Empowering Insular Communities program, which reduces the use of fossil fuels. If we are concerned about the demise of coral reefs, which are our first line of defense against shoreline erosion and storms, let's put more money in the Coral Reef Initiative — and let's make sure that money gets down to the people who are working on mitigation in the lagoons and on the fringing reefs around our islands.

If we are concerned about whether the next generation and the one after that will be able to cope with climate change, let's double down on your ABC Initiative. Let's make sure our young people get an education that will enable them to be resilient and resourceful, because they will need those skills as the world changes dramatically around them.

And, if we are concerned about how to address the question of refugees — and surely there will be climate change refugees from Freely Associated States in the Pacific — then let us put more funding into existing compact impact programs for Guam, Hawai'i, and the Northern Marianas.

We don't have a lot of time, Madame Secretary, and we don't have a lot of resources. So let's not go back to square one. Let's focus any money we have on programs that are already up and running and already respond to climate change.

Lastly, as the only Micronesian in Congress, I feel I have the obligation to speak up in support of the Palau Compact. We are approaching the five-year anniversary of signing this agreement, which affirms the important national security relationship between the Republic of Palau and the United States. Yet, to date, the United States has not fulfilled the funding commitment we made to our ally. Instead, we eke out payment year-to-year. This is no way to treat a friend.

Frankly, the delay is causing some in Palau to question the relationship; and there are other actors in the western Pacific who would be more than willing to step in to the gap. So, I urge the administration — and my colleagues here in Congress — once and for all to identify the necessary funds to renew the Palau Compact.

Thank you.